KAYO HIRAKI

Not too many jazz musicians can make the claim of having had their first gig at age eight. But Kayo Hiraki played hers when she performed on Sunday afternoons in a piano store near her home in the town of Aizu Wakamatsu, northern Japan. It was not, however, the jazz that would later be her love, but the classical music she had learned from her mother. By 2003, Hiraki was performing sold-out shows with Ron Carter at the decidedly tonier Blue Note in New York. So impressed with her was the legendary jazz bassist that he said, "Rarely have I heard a musician as gifted as Ms. Hiraki." In all, Hiraki has released five albums, featuring both her piano and vocal talents. The jazz musician talks to Claudia M. Caruana.

photos by Marc Asnin

All That Jazz

Your mother was a piano instructor. So music was a big part of your home life?

My crib was right next to the family's piano in our small apartment, and my mother put me there to keep an eye on me while she gave piano lessons. Though my father was an engineer, he enjoyed listening to classical music on the radio. So right from the beginning, there was always music at home. When I was three, my mother started teaching me the piano, and she arranged for me to have violin lessons when I was four. But I always regarded the piano as my big toy. Jazz wasn't in the picture then.

What happened after that?

I learned to play the flute because my school had a brass band. In a local band with my friends, I played drums. I continued taking violin lessons because my mother had hopes of me playing in an orchestra one day. Her thinking was that there would always be a need for many violinists in an orchestra, but there is only one pianist. At that time, I also became acquainted with a traditional Japanese instrument, the shamisen. I didn't pursue it because it just didn't appeal to me. The piano continued to be my real love. When I was eight, my mother would take me to the piano store on Sundays. I loved sitting at the piano and playing as crowds outside the store window watched me. Soon, the storeowner saw the value of having a small girl at the piano and began paying me to play for an hour every Sunday. I felt so rich and happy.

And when does the jazz come in?

Like with many young people, the forbidden was tempting. Jazz was exactly that. It was played in clubs where you had to be 18 to get in, and my girlfriends and I were under 18 when we started going there for the music. If only our parents had known where we were spending our time!

Who were your favorite jazz musicians then?

I was enthralled by Miles Davis and two American jazz pianists, Steve Kuhn and McCoy Tyner. At that point, I knew I wanted to come to the United States and see them play. But

what were my chances of even coming to America? When I was 18, I went to Kunitachi College of Music, Japan's leading music conservatory. I already knew I wanted music to be a serious part of my life, and jazz was the music I wanted to play, especially in America.

So you knew you wanted to come to the U.S., but how did you manage to do it? What did your family say?

Of course, all families worry about their children leaving home. Mine was no different, and I was an only child. But one of my cousins lived in San Francisco, and that cousin encouraged me to come to the United States to study jazz and learn English. I was no stranger to American things. My grandfather would go to the States and bring back foods that were popular there. Because of that, I grew up eating oatmeal, which was unusual in Japan at the time. So in a way, my family was Americanized, and they could understand my desire to come to the U.S.

What happened when you came to America?

I visited San Francisco first and stayed with that cousin for a short while. Then I went to New Orleans to experience the jazz there. I made my way to New York, where I felt the jazz was very sophisticated. I began my studies and hoped to launch a career as a jazz musician. In 1988, I studied with three world-renowned pianists — Barry Harris and later Larry Ham and Harry Whitaker. I was asked to perform in concerts and had small gigs in various places including restaurants and clubs. Ten years later, I released my first album, *I Miss You*, with my piano trio.

To be sure, there were many difficult years in the beginning. Often it was a struggle. After all, I was living in a different country dealing with a different language, but I felt comfortable with my music and with what I was doing — composing, arranging and playing jazz. Then, 15 years ago, I found a regular gig with Arturo's, a family-run restaurant that prides itself on its food as well as the jazz musicians it attracts. I love New York and being here, but I miss Japan and my parents. I do concerts in Japan and spend as much time as possible with them. My parents are big jazz fans and always attend all my concerts when I'm in Japan.

It must be a hard life as a musician.

Music is the most important thing in my life. I just love making other people happy! For that, I'd go just about anywhere. When I start seeing smiles in the audience and bodies moving with the music as I perform I think to myself, "Yes! Yes!" It gives me the greatest feeling. Once at Arturo's, a beautiful woman who had obviously been crying came to the piano to talk during a break. She and her boyfriend had split up earlier that day. She just happened to stop by Arturo's. She heard me playing the piano, and that stopped her tears completely. My music gave her a boost, and so she came to thank me. She said that after listening to my music it was as though a thorn had been pulled from her heart.

How popular is jazz in Japan today?

When I was a student, brass and marching bands were popular, and there were many competitions among local and regional schools. Today, those heated competitions focus on jazz bands. It's not unusual to see Japanese girls on the Tokyo subway carrying saxophones in pink and other colorful cases. Jazz clubs remain popular in Japan, and there's continued interest in jazz from the U.S.

Jazz musicians have always been able to take the popular music of the day and use it as a vessel for creative interpretation and improvisation. In the 1940s and 1950s, jazz musicians took Broadway show tunes and played instrumental and vocal interpretations of them. The same applies today among modern jazz musicians who compose their own music as well as play interpretations of popular music.

When touring in Japan, do you play with the same musicians as in New York?

Years back, I would bring the musicians I worked with in New York over to Japan. We'd travel together, with my dad as the driver, to get to our concerts. But that became impractical, especially as my parents got older. Musical ensembles tend to change often. It's good for the musicians and good for the music because a lot of high energy comes with the change. This often results in more dynamic music. Music created by groups who work together all the time can get stale. That doesn't happen when different musicians work with one another. Usually, I play in a trio, other times in a quartet. It depends whether I'm doing vocals while at the piano.

How different is it performing in Japan to the U.S.?

Audience response tends to be different. In the States, audiences are more vocal. They clap loudly, sometimes even scream. In Japan, audiences are more reserved. But there's a strong love of jazz in Japan just as there is in New York.

How do you relax at home and when you're on tour?

When I'm in New York, I like to go to Central Park in the morning and do tai chi. It gives me energy, especially if I'm playing that evening. I feel healthier, too. I try to do tai chi when I'm on tour, but that's sometimes difficult. You do a lot of running around, and there are late hours when you're on tour.

How do Americans treat female Japanese musicians?

We're treated the same as other musicians now. Actually, it wasn't easy when I first came here. It was difficult

for me to act like American musicians at the beginning. I'm a modest sort of person. In my generation, Japanese girls were raised to be quiet and obedient. Initially, it was difficult for me to acquire a more confident attitude like an American.

What do you see yourself doing five years from now?
I hope to do more gigs and tours, sharing more of my music with old and new audiences alike. I've toured and played in France several times. In fact, I've just returned from a three-week concert tour in Paris. An important goal for me is to compose more of my own music, which is what I'm doing now.

What music do you listen to for inspiration?
My background was in classical music and I still play my violin as a kind of hobby. I love most music, including funk, R&B, Latin, Brazilian and African. One thing I've noticed is that many musical traditions are being combined today, which results in a lot of new music.

What are your favorite jazz pieces?
I love standards, especially those written by Hoagy Carmichael, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and George Gershwin. America has magnificent composers. I never get bored listening to these songs and learning them.

How do you select the material you play in concerts and at your regular gig at Arturo's?
I already have more than 300 pieces in my repertoire and continue to add new ones. I don't want to play the same music every time I perform. At Arturo's, I perform five nights a week, and I care about the people working there also. I try to entertain them first! Even the employees dance sometimes. I always try variations of set songs, mixing different kinds of music, for example, fast swing, medium swing, Latin, waltz, bossa nova and samba. I want people to enjoy the music and dance if they feel like it.

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Do you work alone in doing improvisations of jazz?
When I perform as a solo pianist, I do the improvising myself. That's always a great feeling. When I play with the group, the group improvises. Our energy is tremendous when we improvise. This makes infinite possibilities for nuances on a theme and approaches.

Do you ever do charity performances?
One of my special joys is playing at nursing homes, hospitals and elementary schools. I do this both in New York and Japan. At several of the nursing homes, there are residents with Alzheimer's disease. Many of these people are expressionless at first, almost as if they're asleep. The music changes them. Their eyes open and sometimes they smile or have tears in their eyes.

Are there any unusual places where you perform?
Every year, my trio performs at the New York City Marathon. This marathon goes through all of New York's five boroughs. Usually, we perform near the end of the race route, close to the Tavern on the Green restaurant. The runners, and there are over 30,000 of them, are really exhausted at that point, so we hope our music gives them an extra boost of energy. Many of the runners give us the thumbs-up as they run past. That's a terrific experience for us, and I believe it's good for the runners as well.

How have jazz and music changed in recent years?
What has changed is how we enjoy music, not so much the music itself. Most music is downloaded from the Internet to MP3 players, including jazz. This sometimes results in fewer people buying entire CDs and getting to know the work of individual artists.

What advice would you give an aspiring jazz musician in Japan?
Believe in yourself and never give up. Continue to practice. Follow your heart. Jazz is a language, I believe, so if you would like to speak out, come to the U.S. You'll get wonderful experience here because jazz was born here.

Would it be more difficult for you to get started as a jazz musician today than it was 20 years ago?
People may think it's easier to learn jazz these days, but that's not the case. Yes, today people have computers to research information. CDs and videos are free for downloading, and other materials for study are getting incredibly inexpensive. There are excellent teachers almost everywhere in the world. About 20 years ago, many of the famous jazz artists were still around. I've played with Miles Davis's band bassist Ron Carter. As I say, jazz is a language, and like a language you can learn it from tapes and books. For it to be real, though, you need to feel all the nuances and experience it with others.

Are there any specific disappointments with being a jazz musician?
I'm unable to think of one. Because we create our musical world every day, musicians are very fortunate. I can think of nothing better that I would want to do. ®